

**Chesterfield County
Youth Services**

P.O. Box 40
Chesterfield, VA 23832
(804) 796-7100
Youthservices@chesterfield.gov

Providing a FIRST CHOICE community through excellence in public service



SAY-SO!

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**Strictly About
Youth-
Speak Out!**

**Chesterfield County
2003 Community Youth Forum**

Results and Recommendations

Say So! Strictly About Youth - Speak Out!

This year marked the 10th anniversary of Chesterfield County Youth Services' annual community youth forum sponsored by the Youth Services Citizen Board and the Midlothian Kiwanis Club. SAY-SO! Strictly About Youth - Speak Out! 2003 brought together youths and adults to discuss various issues that face young people in Chesterfield County today. Over the past 10 years, participants have discussed a wide variety of topics, including teen sex and pregnancy; violence and racial tension; SOL testing; after-school activities; teen suicide; and drug, alcohol and tobacco use.

On Nov. 13, 2003, nearly 100 concerned citizens, including educators, business people and young people convened at Manchester Middle School to participate in the 2003 community youth forum. After sharing a free pizza dinner, participants split into seven groups to discuss issues that are important to them. The 40-minute sessions were facilitated by a youth and an adult member of the Chesterfield County Youth Services Citizen Board.

The forum is unique in that both young people and adults are included in the discussion groups. Young people have a chance to voice their opinions to adults and adults have the opportunity to share their experiences with the youths.

This report contains the results and recommendations gathered at this year's youth forum. Youth Services is delighted to share the opinions and suggestions of youths and adults from Chesterfield County.

If you would like to receive additional copies of this report, please contact Youth Services at (804) 796-7100.

STAFF

Jana D. Carter, Director

Sharyl Adams, Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist

Sarah Bodsford, Youth Services Specialist

YOUTH SERVICES CITIZEN BOARD

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Molly Dawes, Student

George Tarasidis, Student

Mary Conkright, Student



THE BUSINESS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Young people are clearly a priority in Chesterfield County. That priority is demonstrated in the superior quality of our schools and incredible array of services for young people and families. Youth Services is charged with providing leadership in the coordination of planning for our youths. Always critical to our success is the participation, support and collaboration of the youth-serving organizations in our community.

There are many ways to approach youth development. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Youth Services, through the involvement of our Youth Services Citizen Board and our Partnership for Youth, a multidisciplinary planning team, has worked to integrate two complementary models for youth development in our community. The first, **Communities That Care**, is a model developed at the University of Washington. The process engages the community in using data to identify risks and to establish priorities, then promotes the selection of research-based programs that address the selected priorities. The process focuses both on reducing factors that increase the risk of problem behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency or school dropouts and on increasing factors that promote healthy behaviors. Promoting research-based strategies helps assure the responsible use of public resources.

The second model, **40 Developmental Assets**, developed by the Search Institute, focuses on the concept that there are specific skills that young people need to be successful. The more skills, or assets, that a young person has, the less likely that the young person will engage in negative behaviors. The assets model promotes the involvement of the entire community to ensure that our young people develop the skills they need to be successful and healthy. The assets focus is on all youths and emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships.

By integrating the two approaches, Chesterfield County capitalizes on the strengths of each and tailors them to fit our community.

Discussion Group Topics

YOU WON'T BE GRADED ON THIS

Are school discipline policies effective?

RAISING THE BAR

What are the challenges facing young people today?

IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP

How can we help prevent suicide among our youths?

HE SAID, SHE SAID

How do we promote healthy relationships?

WHAT'S THE REAL DEAL?

Is "everybody" using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs?

BULLY BUSTING

How can we help young people feel safe?

LIVING TOGETHER

How can we celebrate the rich diversity in our community?



YOU WON'T BE GRADED ON THIS

Are school discipline policies effective?

Facilitators: Sharyl Adams and Ashley Smith

This discussion focused on whether the discipline policies in Chesterfield County Public Schools are fair, effective and carried out consistently throughout the county.

Members of this discussion group expressed concern regarding the consistency with which discipline policies are administered. Some group members felt there are teachers and administrators who loosely enforce discipline policies while others strictly enforce these policies. Group members discussed developing a plan to ensure the consistency of discipline policies throughout the county.

Most agreed that the zero-tolerance policy should apply to weapons, however, this policy's consequences may not be appropriate for those who are caught with drugs in school. Instead, the consequence should confront the substance-abuse problem that the student may have.

In addition, most students and adults felt that in-school detentions varied widely as an effective punishment, depending on how they were implemented and out-of-school suspensions opened doorways to problems of unsupervised time. For example, one student said it made no sense to her to suspend students for skipping school.

Most members also liked the presence of school resource officers. Most young people felt that the officers who were friendly and likable, yet did their jobs, were the most effective.

The group suggested alternative discipline policies they felt would be more effective to the young people facing the consequences. They included:

- Instead of in-school detention or out-of-school suspension, require student to participate in a community-service activity.
- Many students who are frequently getting in trouble do not have support at home. Set up after-school counseling groups for students who want help coping with problems at home.
- Encourage teachers and administrators to develop meaningful relationships with students. These professionals are adults that a student can turn to in a time of need

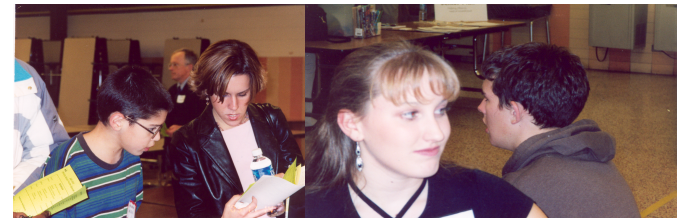
CONTRIBUTORS

Special thanks to the following organizations that contributed to SAY-SO!

Carrabba's Italian Grill
Little Caesars Pizza
Oasis Sports Park
La Siesta
Little Professor Book Center
Fantastic Sams
Cold Stone Ice Creamery
CiCi's Pizza
Tan Right

Science Museum of Virginia
Wal-Mart
Holiday Inn Select, Koger Center
Chesterfield Towne Center
Sam Goody
Circuit City
Best Buy
Flagstop
Mary Kay
Qdoba Mexican Grill

Special thanks to Jana Carter for providing photos used in this report.



CONCLUSION

The Chesterfield County Youth Services Citizen Board and the Youth Services Department extend our heartfelt thanks to all who participated in the 2003 community youth forum. The event remains a success because of individuals who care enough to be involved in their community. It is the participation of our youths and adults that helps to make Chesterfield County a wonderful place to live and raise a family. We are also grateful to our volunteers and facilitators for their leadership and support.

Information gathered from the discussion groups will be used to assist in developing and refining strategies for implementing the county's comprehensive youth-development plan. We invite forum participants and other community members to build on the forum by expanding on and further exploring the ideas and strategies generated there.

If we can assist you in any way or if you would like more information, please contact Chesterfield Youth Services at 796-7100 or e-mail youthservices@chesterfield.gov.

RAISING THE BAR

What are the challenges facing young people today?

Facilitators: Marianne Feeney and Candace Rheinhart

The world that young people live in today is dramatically different from 10 or 20 years ago. Society is constantly changing, and with these changes come new challenges for young people.



Members of the group began by comparing some of the different challenges that young people face in 2003 compared to challenges faced by young people decades ago. Most agreed that youths today deal with overcrowded schools, drugs, alcohol, sexual harassment, personal safety and extremely high and demanding expectations. In years past, many of these issues were not as prevalent.

Most members agreed that the toughest challenges facing young people in Chesterfield County are peer pressure and balancing school, social life, work and other after-school activities. Many of the other challenges grow out of these.

The group suggested ways that individual young people, as well as the entire community, could face and overcome these challenges.

Suggestions for young people included:

- In order to overcome peer pressure, youths must be comfortable with themselves. Developing a high sense of self-esteem will help youths say no to negative peer pressure.
- Learning good time-management practices, as well as learning how to avoid procrastination, will help youths balance different aspects of their lives effectively.
- Realizing that you can't please everyone will help young people find positive friendship groups and not be overly-concerned with fitting in.

Positives for the community included:

- Adult role models will help young people face these challenges.
- The community should offer skill-building classes.
- Encourage adults to accept responsibility for the positive development of each young person in the community.

IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP

How can we prevent suicide among our youths?

Facilitators: Henry Mack and Jessica Mears



Several suicides among young people in Chesterfield in the past two years have brought this issue to the forefront of concern. Members of this discussion group felt that the cause of teen suicide is the inability to effectively deal with issues such as stress, bullying, bad grades, unstable home life, parental pressures,

and failure in school, among others. The group discussed the importance of encouraging young people to talk about their feelings with someone or get involved in positive activities such as sports or volunteering. In addition, simple activities such as taking a walk, reading, writing, playing with pets and listening to music can be effective stress relievers.

Parents, family members, friends, teachers, clergy and others are all potential sources of help. Members of the group stressed that if someone turns to you for help, it is important to know how to help him or her. The group suggested that simply talking to the person, listening to their problems, letting them know that you are there to help and telling an adult who can help are the best ways to deal with someone who comes to you.

Some young people, however, are afraid to seek help for themselves. It is important to be aware of signs that someone may be considering suicide. The group identified things to look out for. These included:

- Depression
- Giving away prized possessions and other important personal belongings
- Broken friendships and relationships
- Isolation

If someone you know is experiencing these signs you should talk to that person, listen to what they have to say, let them know that you are there for them and immediately tell an adult. You might save that person's life.

SUMMARY

At the end of the evening all participants were asked to complete an evaluation. As an incentive, completed evaluations were entered into a prize drawing. Prizes included a variety of items, such as gift certificates for restaurants and shopping malls.

The survey solicited participant feedback regarding the forum and ways to improve it. Participants also had the opportunity to suggest topics to be discussed at future forums. A total of 72 participants responded to the survey. Ninety-seven percent of all respondents indicated that they enjoyed participation in the youth forum.

In response to the statement, "Overall I thought the forum was..." Responses received included:

Youth responses—Great; very beneficial; informative; an awesome experience; very good it, answered all of my questions; excellent; a wonderful experience and a good opportunity to hear other people's ideas.

Adult responses—Very good; great; excellent; very relevant and well-conducted; a very good idea; well-organized, informative and well done.

Topics for future forums suggested by participants included media and youths, date rape, independent living, divorce, sex, peer pressure, popularity and dress codes.

Youth Services and the Youth Services Citizen Board will use the information gathered from survey responses to make improvements as they plan the next forum.

LIVING TOGETHER

How can we celebrate the rich diversity in our community?

Facilitators: Diann DeLaPena and Jennifer Barlow

Chesterfield County is rapidly becoming a more diverse community. Members of this group discussed diversity, challenges of living in a diverse community and ways to promote positive aspects of living in a richly diversified county.

Group members agreed that diversity includes, but is not limited to, race. People of different genders, races, religions, cultures, backgrounds and beliefs all equally contribute to the rich diversity in our community. Many people celebrate different holidays, speak multiple languages and have different traditions.

Diversity can present new challenges to the community. Many people cannot speak English and have trouble communicating and finding jobs. The parents of young people in school who cannot speak English cannot help their children with homework. Group members agreed that some people do not respect diversity and many groups formed in schools are formed along ethnic lines.

To embrace diversity and all of its positive contributions, group members suggested the following:

- Teach students to value and respect different cultures, religions and backgrounds.
- Help the students of non-English-speaking families by offering life- skills classes and having other students help tutor them and help them with homework if needed.
- Encourage PTAs and other organizations to lead by example in celebrating diversity.



HE SAID, SHE SAID

How do we promote healthy relationships?

Facilitators: Lynne Foote and Ginny Fuller

Many times we see young people involved in unhealthy relationships. The members of this group discussed characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships and reasons why someone may stay involved in an unhealthy relationship. They also suggested ways to teach young people how to identify, avoid or leave an unhealthy relationship.

Members of the group agreed that a healthy relationship is one in which both individuals involved are honest and feel valued and respected. In a healthy relationship, communication is open and there is no abuse, violence or control. However, in an unhealthy relationship, one person may feel intimidated by the other person. Words used by the group to describe an unhealthy relationship included abuse, violence, manipulation, control, isolation, dishonesty and disrespect.

Group participants agreed that in many instances people choose to stay involved in an unhealthy relationship because of low self-esteem, a need for acceptance, drug or alcohol use, or fear.

They suggested that if you or someone you know is in an unhealthy relationship you can help that person by talking, listening and supporting them. Young people can be examples to their peers, and if a friend needs help you, a parent, teacher or guidance counselor may be a resource.

Group members suggested ways that the community can help prevent teens from becoming involved in unhealthy relationships. These included:

- Educate elementary students about healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- Provide more activities for teens to attend on the weekends with friends. This will also help encourage group dating.
- Provide information about abuse and date rape in family-life classes.
- Provide teens with resources they can use to seek help if they or a friend are involved in an unhealthy relationship.

WHAT'S THE REAL DEAL?

Is “everybody” using tobacco, alcohol, or drugs?

Facilitators: Wendell Roberts and Mary Conkright

Most young people, at one time or another, will be confronted with the choice of whether or not to use tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. Members of this group discussed reasons why young people use drugs, consequences young people face if caught using and ways to prevent use.



Group members agreed that many young people turn to these substances because of stress, boredom, peer pressure and media influences. Some young people live in homes where parents abuse these substances; therefore, the young person sees tobacco, alcohol or drug use as a normal activity. There are even some parents who give their consent or allow young people to drink in their homes.

Most young people know about the consequences of substance abuse because they receive information about it at school. Legal consequences are most important to youths. They do not want to risk having to go to court or losing their driver's licenses. Many group members felt that school assemblies that teach kids about the consequence of tobacco, alcohol or drug use are effective.

The group discussed ways to prevent young people from engaging in these negative behaviors. These suggestions included:

- Educating parents about consequences and their responsibilities. Encourage parents to support and stay involved in the lives of their children.
- Creating parental support to network so parents can stay informed and help each other.
- Providing fun activities for young people to participate in on the weekends and giving them safe places to hang out.
- Having students participate in mandatory community-service projects. This will help build positive values in young people.

BULLY BUSTING

How can we help young people feel safe?

Facilitators: Vikki Barth and Joe Gayk

Being the victim of bullying is one of the many challenges facing young people today. The effects of being a bully's victim can lead to depression and, in some cases, suicide. The members of this group discussed what bullying is, who bullies are, why they do what they do and what you can do if you or someone you know is the victim of a bully.

Group members described bullying as a matter of power, control and alienation. Bullies can use verbal, mental, emotional or physical abuse. Many members agreed that the traditional bullying of yesteryear is not the main problem today. Bullying has progressed beyond someone stealing your lunch money. Today, girls and boys may be bullies. Creating gossip, defamation of character and using verbal abuse that cannot be tracked or proven, but that can have profound emotional effects on the victim, are common forms of bullying today.

Group members believed that blanket school programs that address bullies are ineffective. Some group members described programs that incorporate pledges or other similar tools as ineffective. Those reciting these pledges, they believe, become the victims of ridicule.

Group members suggested strategies for confronting the issue of bullying. These included:

- Start with the individual. Each young person has the power to avoid being the victim of a bully. By empowering young people and fostering their self-esteem we can provide them with the tools they need to help themselves.
- Encourage students to band together. There is safety in numbers. The victims of bullies need witnesses, protection and back up. Young people do not have much faith in going to any authority about being a bully's victim.
- The punishment for the bully must address the behavior and find a way to help bring out the good characteristics of the bully instead of reinforcing their bad image.